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ABSTRACT

A crucial key to preventing and ending poverty is the system of education and training for employment. The 104th Congress is considering several proposals to reform vocational education, employment training, and welfare. The most sweeping would consolidate all employment training programs and vocational education into a single block grant to each state. Welfare reform proposals from Congress and the administration seek to speed up the transition to the work force. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) maintains that the key to true welfare reform is access to educational opportunity for all girls and women. Ending the dependence of female-headed households on welfare means helping young mothers beat the odds by getting the highest-quality education and training possible, particularly in higher-paying, traditionally male-dominated jobs. AAUW urges retention of targeted services for women and girls, a cautious approach to consolidation of vocational education with other job training programs, and strong accountability provisions in all vocational education programs. With regard to welfare reform, AAUW urges Congress and the states to allow recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children to pursue postsecondary education as preparation for work. Job training programs should include training in nontraditional occupations for women. AAUW supports a guarantee of child care for women who participate in education, training, or work programs. (Contains 15 footnotes.) (YLB)

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AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY WOMEN

Education and Training: The Path Out of Poverty for Women

April 1995

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In recent years many Americans have become increasingly worried about how best to help impoverished families without making them dependent on long-term government support. Debate in Congress has focused on two alternatives: reforming the welfare system to encourage and reward transition to the paid work force, or—if that fails—requiring work on public projects in exchange for the welfare check, an option known as "workfare."

Largely missing from the debate, however, is a crucial key to preventing and ending poverty: our nation's system of education and training for employment. Making the link to vocational education programs is especially critical because the 104th Congress is considering revisions of vocational education policy simultaneously with welfare reform. This brief examines the connections between education and training programs, welfare reform, and economic self-sufficiency.

Courtesy of the American Vocational Association

Designing a better future: *Training programs in drafting and other nontraditional careers hold promise for women trying to break out of poverty's stubborn grip.*

AN OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT SYSTEM AND PROPOSED REFORMS

The academic and vocational skills provided by our public elementary and secondary schools are the building blocks of the nation's education and training system. Approximately half of all high school graduates go on to a four-year college and a professional career. The other half may earn a vocational degree at a community college or trade school, or may go directly into the work force with the vocational skills they learned in high school.

This brief studies the links between education and training programs, welfare reform, and economic self-sufficiency for women.

Government-sponsored employment training programs fill in the gaps for school drop-outs, displaced workers, the poor, and others who have lacked adequate educational opportunities or have special needs. Of the nation's estimated 154 employment training programs, the largest number serve either veterans (18) or youth (16), while the smallest number (6) serve women and minorities. Nine of the programs serve the poor, as defined by federal guidelines.[1]

Of these nine, two programs are the government workhorses, together accounting for 60 percent of federal spending on job training for the poor.[2] Both provide career counseling and skills assessment,

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Courtesy of Women's Opportunities for Women

New skill: *For Ana Esquivel, a single mother of three in Visalia, California, a prevocational skills program and on-the-job training in wire crimping at California Wire Cloth provided a way off public assistance.*

remedial education, vocational skill training, job placement assistance, and support services for the jobless. One program, the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), targets poor and displaced workers. The other, the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program, serves recipients—primarily women—of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), the cash assistance program that is the primary component of the welfare system.

The 104th Congress is considering several proposals to reform vocational education, employment training, and welfare. The most sweeping would consolidate all employment training programs and vocational education into a single block grant to each state. Such a system would dismantle programs like JTPA and JOBS, and give state and local governments greater flexibility in spending federal dollars. Proponents argue that this approach would allow states to create bigger, better programs out of the current fragmented system and provide "one-stop shopping"—a single administrative office that would direct clients to the right program for them. Critics worry the level of services will drop, especially for people hardest to serve—those for whom poverty and joblessness are the most entrenched. They also fear that the level of services may vary widely from state to state and that groups with particular needs, like displaced homemakers, may be overlooked.

In vocational education, designated funds for sex equity, single-parent, and displaced homemaker programs would probably be eliminated under block grants or consolidation of education and training programs. But these programs are in jeopardy anyway because both Congress and the Clinton administration want to scratch programs for target populations. The administration also favors reforms to integrate more academic content into the vocational education curriculum and to ease the transition from school to work.

Welfare reform proposals from both Congress and the administration seek to speed up the transition to the work force by requiring participation in workfare programs and by setting a lifetime cap on the number of years individuals are eligible for welfare. Under some plans, welfare would change from an entitlement—a payment the government must make regardless of its impact on the budget—to a discretionary expenditure, in which the government could limit spending even if the needs of some eligible individuals go unmet. Sparking a furor, Republican leaders in Congress have also proposed several so-called "child exclusions," which would limit the number of children in a family who can receive benefits and deny benefits to children of teen mothers on welfare and children whose paternity cannot be established by the state.

THE OVERALL PICTURE: AAUW'S PERSPECTIVE

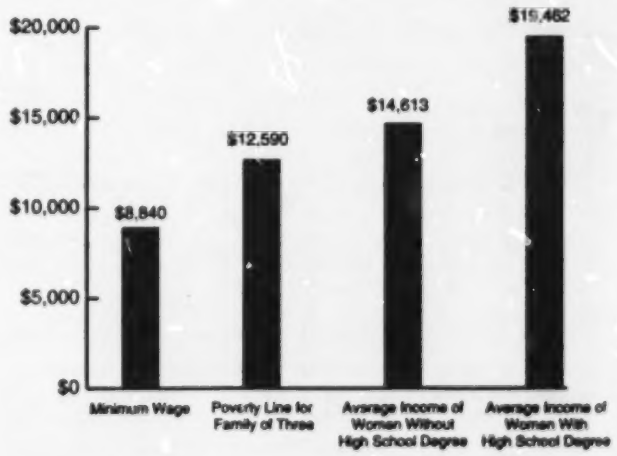
The American Association of University Women has a long history of working to improve opportunities for higher education for all women, including those on AFDC. In 1986 AAUW successfully lobbied to stop welfare administrators from counting student aid as income when calculating AFDC benefits, a practice that kept many low-income women from pursuing the college degree that would enable them to support their families. Conscious that many women choose careers that do not require college degrees, AAUW has consistently worked to retain and expand programs for single parents, displaced homemakers, and sex equity in vocational education. In the last decade, AAUW has increasingly turned its attention to elementary, secondary, and vocational education, recognizing that early educational experiences have long-lasting effects on educational attainment, career choices and preparation, and economic opportunity.

AAUW maintains that the key to true welfare reform that breaks the cycle of poverty and promotes economic self-sufficiency is access to educational opportunity for all girls and women. To create such educational opportunity, we support:

- elementary and secondary schools that integrate academic and vocational studies and challenge assumptions about traditional and nontraditional women's work, thus keeping open all career options for girls and boys;
- opportunities for all qualified and interested individuals to pursue four-year college degrees;
- high-quality high school and community college vocational education programs that teach marketable skills; and
- employment training programs that provide marketable skills and support services to ease the transition to paid work.

AAUW supports retaining targeted services for women and girls in vocational education and job training programs, in order to counteract the legacy of sex discrimination in those programs and to prepare young women for economic self-sufficiency. To ensure that programs meet the needs of women and girls, consolidation of education and training programs

THE LESS EDUCATION A WOMAN HAS, THE MORE LIKELY SHE IS TO LIVE IN POVERTY.



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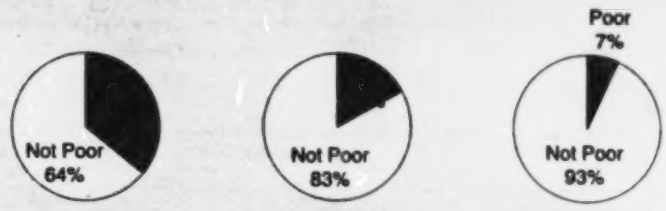
into block grants should be accompanied by strong accountability measures.

AAUW argues that women with dependent children living in poverty are entitled to public assistance while preparing for a job that pays a living wage, and that education is strongly linked to employability and economic opportunity. While a four-year college degree is the surest path out of poverty, educational opportunities for women in poverty must also include remedial education for basic literacy, high school or equivalent education, and quality vocational education.

FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY POOR.



Earning a living wage. It is no secret that better-educated workers typically earn higher incomes. At the current minimum wage, which sets the standard for nonskilled labor, a full-time worker earns $8,840 a year—well under the federal poverty line of $12,590 for a woman with two children. The average full-time woman worker with less than a high school education earns only $14,613 a year, enough to inch a family of three over the eligibility limit for most federal aid programs, but not enough to free them from poverty. That same worker earns $19,462 with a high school education, and $30,394 with a college education.[3]

No matter how much education they have, women still earn significantly less, on average, than men. A college-educated woman earns only a little more than a man with a high school education, who makes $27,357 to her $30,394.[4]

In large part this earnings gap is the result of occupational segregation. Women workers, particularly those with less education, still tend to cluster in female-dominated jobs, which typically pay less than male-dominated occupations. The weekly salary for young women in female-dominated sales and administrative support jobs, for instance, averages from $313 to $365, while young men in male-dominated jobs of machine operator and laborer earn between $393 and $503.[5]

Female-headed households are hit hardest by the earnings gap. Because they enjoy less earning power at every level of educational attainment, women have a harder time supporting a family on one income than men. It is not surprising that 36 percent of female-headed households are poor, compared with 17 percent of male-headed households and 7 percent of married-couple households.[6] For people with the lowest levels of education and training, it is virtually impossible to earn a wage that supports a family.

Ending the dependence of female-headed households on welfare means helping young mothers beat the odds by getting the highest-quality education and training possible, particularly in the higher-paying, traditionally male-dominated jobs. High-quality vocational education programs are needed to enable young women to become self-supporting as soon as they leave school, avoiding the mire of welfare altogether. For women who have not had such opportunities, employment training programs must pick up the slack.

Knocking down sex barriers. One barrier to women entering nontraditional occupations is the gender-conscious nature of vocational education classes in high schools and community colleges. Most are highly sex-segregated and laden with discrimination, including sexual harassment.

Recognizing this, since 1976 the federal government has included provisions in vocational education programs to help women and girls enter higher-paying, nontraditional occupations. Congress has required states to:

- designate a portion of their vocational education funds for programs to combat sex discrimination in vocational education programs;
- appoint a "sex equity coordinator" to oversee these programs;
- designate another portion of their funds for programs serving single parents, including displaced homemakers—women who, because of divorce or a spouse's death, suddenly find themselves the chief breadwinners of their families.

Together, all these programs targeting services to women and girls, many of them on AFDC, constitute about one-tenth of a state's federal aid for vocational education.

Programs for single parents and displaced homemakers provide guidance and counseling, classes in life skills such as managing money and basic academic skills, and support services such as child care and transportation. These support services are particularly critical to women during training and transition to work, say program administrators. In 1994 the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education (NCWGE) surveyed 34 local programs for single parents and displaced homemakers in 12 states. Enrollment figures provided by 19 of the 34 programs show they served more than 1,800 people, most of them women, in a single program year, suggesting that such programs overall serve thousands of women nationwide.[7]

The sex equity programs also provide support services, including recruitment and counseling, for women entering nontraditional occupations. Program administrators in the NCWGE survey stressed the importance of providing help for low-income students, offering intensive case management for individuals in nontraditional occupations, and working to foster community and employer acceptance of women in nontraditional fields.[8]

IMPACT OF PROGRAMS FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

The designated federal funds have resulted in more vocational education programs targeted for women and girls. In fact, these federal dollars are the only source of funding for 22 of the 34 local programs responding to the NCWGE survey; the programs would not exist without the set-asides.[9] But the programs' impact has been limited by a low level of funding and by persistent sex-stereotyping of occupations by parents, teachers, employers, and students.

Before 1990 most states distributed the funds using a rigid formula that spread the money too thinly to create meaningful programs. Since then, states have awarded the grants through a competitive process, which enables them to put more money into deserving programs. Many promising programs have been funded under this process, but low funding curtails both the breadth and depth of these efforts.

Because of deeply entrenched attitudes about traditional men's and women's work, sex segregation in high school vocational education has been resistant to change,

despite the sex equity programs. In 1986, for example, 94 percent of vocational education students majoring in mechanics were male; three years later, the share of male students had slipped only to 89 percent. Similarly, in 1986 women accounted for 80 percent of students training for health careers such as nurse's aide or medical technician; three years later, occupational segregation in the field had decreased, but women still dominated the classes at 70 percent.[10]

PROPOSALS FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

The sex equity, single-parent, and displaced homemaker programs are in jeopardy under nearly all the proposed reforms to vocational education.

The Clinton administration has proposed integrating academic and vocational studies at the high school level. Programs to meet the needs of special populations, like women and minorities, would be deemphasized in favor of setting and achieving high standards for all students, as outlined in Goals 2000, the federal law that establishes a framework for school reform through the end of the century. The administration also favors linking high school vocational education to both community college vocational programs and transition-to-work programs, such as apprenticeships, that are featured in the 1994 School to Work Act.

In contrast, the Republican leadership in Congress would remove most federal spending restrictions on vocational education and give the dollars to the states in block grants. Vocational education and other job training programs might be consolidated into a single block grant. Unless states chose to fund such programs with their block grant dollars, the designated funds programs designed to serve women would disappear.

Policymakers on both sides of the aisle generally favor increased accountability measures. These would require program administrators to show how successful programs have been in serving targeted populations and in helping participants find and retain jobs that pay a living wage.

AAUW'S RECOMMENDATIONS ON VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

AAUW maintains that it is imperative to retain targeted services for women and girls, in order to overcome the legacy of sex discrimination and occupational segregation in these programs and prepare young women for economic self-sufficiency. AAUW argues that the sex equity and displaced homemaker designated-funds programs have been effective, given the limits of their funding, and should be retained. The competitive grant process should also be retained, perhaps with additional requirements to target the neediest clients.

If the federal government adopts block grants or eliminates designated funds programs, AAUW urges states not to revert to the pattern that prevailed in the past, when less than 0.2 percent of vocational education funds were used for programs targeting women and girls.[11] States should continue to fund sex equity, single-parent, and displaced homemaker programs from their block grants.

For similar reasons, AAUW recommends that consolidation of vocational education with other job training programs should be approached cautiously. Vocational education programs that provide high-quality job preparation before young people enter the job market are the preventive medicine of this campaign; adult job training programs are the emergency room services. State and local policymakers with bleeding economies may neglect the longer-term, and ultimately less costly, solution in their understandable rush to reduce both unemployment and welfare expenditures. And girls and women may be shunted aside, to the back of the operating room, in the process.

AAUW strongly urges that all vocational education programs, including block grant programs if adopted, include strong accountability provisions. States should be required to collect and submit data, broken down by sex, race, and socioeconomic status, that demonstrate that they continue to serve the populations targeted for vocational education services in the current legislation, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act. Serving these populations must mean creating real opportunity—jobs and access to higher incomes.

Lessons Learned. When AFDC began in 1935, it was conceived as a version of the earlier "mother's pensions," an income supplement for female-headed households to enable mothers to perform what was then seen as their primary responsibility in life: childrearing. In the mid-1960s this attitude began to shift to one that emphasized the mother's responsibility to support her family financially, creating a new emphasis on job training programs to enable the welfare client to move off the welfare rolls and into a paying job. This shift in attitude stemmed in part from the rethinking of gender roles and the resulting influx of women into the work force, and in part from the perception that a growing proportion of welfare clients were unmarried mothers heading "undeserving" families, rather than families who had lost a breadwinner through death or divorce.[12]

An early job training program targeting welfare recipients was the Work Incentive (WIN) program of the 1970s. It funded

Courtesy of the American Vocational Association

Aiming high: *In Oklahoma, 17-year-old Misty McCulley combines high school academics with a program in aviation maintenance at the Tulsa Technology Center.*

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some job training, but also provided a financial incentive to seek paid employment by allowing welfare clients who found jobs to keep a third of their earnings over and above their aid check. (Previous welfare rules reduced the welfare check by the amount of any earned income.) Under the Reagan Administration, those financial incentives were limited to the first four months of work and WIN was turned into a demonstration program for workfare experiments—programs that required welfare recipients to work at public service jobs. In an evaluation, the Manpower Development Research Corporation found that these programs increased employment and earnings, but did not significantly reduce expenditures on welfare.[13]

In 1988 the Family Support Act replaced WIN with the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program, implemented in October 1990. JOBS targets parents under 24 years of age, high school drop-outs, and individuals with no work experience. The program encourages coordination with projects run by Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA)—the federal job training program that serves displaced workers and the poor—as well as community colleges and community-based organizations. JOBS services include basic education, job skills training, and support services. JOBS clients receive assistance with transportation and child care, and are allowed to keep their child care and Medicaid coverage when they first start working if, as is often the case, the job does not provide health insurance. The education services can include postsecondary education (vocational or academic), an option 25 percent of JOBS clients have pursued.[14]

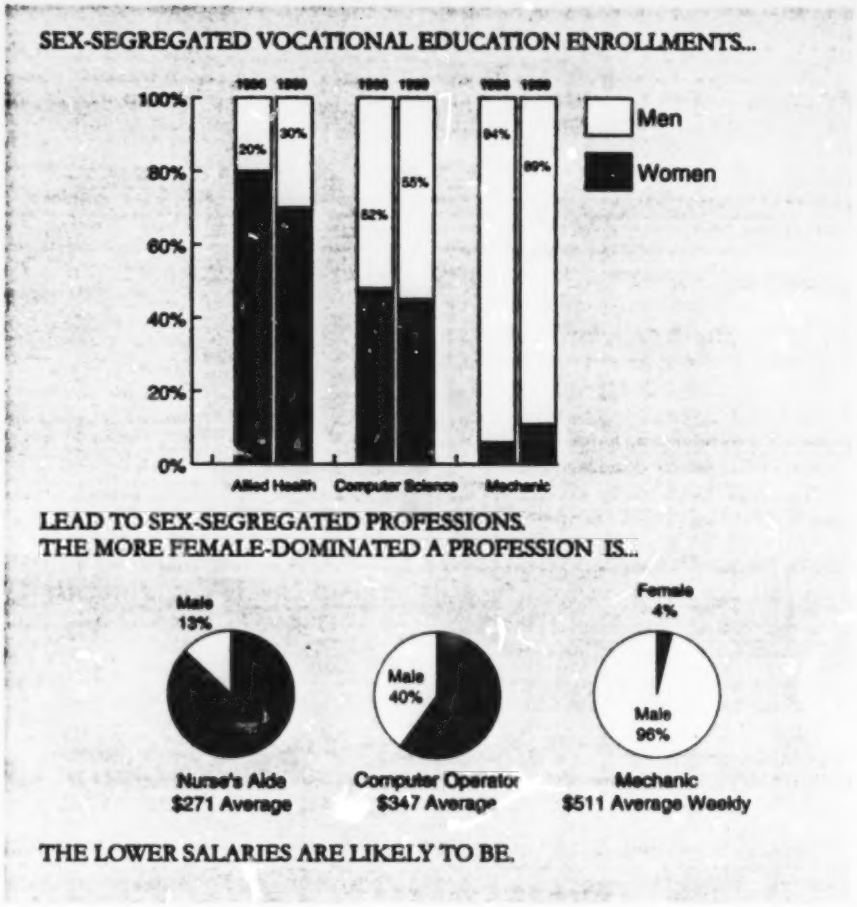
The paramount lesson of these job training programs, including the displaced homemaker programs under the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act, is the crucial importance of support services in moving women into the work force. In addition to training in the actual job skills, low-income women may need training in conducting a job search, handling an interview, and adapting to a work environment. Particularly in nontraditional work environments, women may need training, counseling, and support in dealing with sexual harassment. Adequate transportation and child care services are absolutely essential to success in these programs.

JOB TRAINING AND WELFARE REFORM PROPOSALS

Widespread criticism of the welfare system over the past decade has prompted numerous proposals for welfare reform, nearly all focused on moving people faster from welfare to the work force, usually within two years. After that time, a participant would lose all benefits or be required to take a public job. Some congressional leaders also favor a lifetime limit of five years on welfare. While education and job training were integral parts of welfare reform proposals in the early 1990s, more recent proposals leave these areas to state discretion; the newer proposals focus on providing welfare funds to states in block grants to allow states more flexibility to design their own programs. Other provisions, including the so-called child exclusion, aim to remove supposed incentives for young women, particularly teens, to seek public assistance for bearing children; they also aim to increase paternal responsibility for child support.

Critics of current job training programs question whether education and training help hasten welfare recipients' move to the paid work force.

A 1994 government report on the JOBS program noted that the program's success was limited by such factors as graduates' inability to get jobs that pay a living wage. Three years after completing one of the most outstanding JOBS programs in the country, at Riverside, California, only 23 percent of program participants were working and off AFDC, compared with 18 percent of those who had not participated. The low-wage jobs for which most JOBS programs prepare their clients simply do not provide enough income to keep people in the labor force long term.[15]



AAUW RECOMMENDATIONS ON WELFARE REFORM

AAUW maintains that it is shortsighted to create disincentives for using welfare without first creating real opportunity for low-income women with families to become self-supporting through education and training. In order to earn an income that will support a family, women need access to the higher-paying jobs that are available through two routes: postsecondary education and nontraditional skilled trades.

AAUW therefore urges Congress and the states to allow AFDC recipients to pursue postsecondary education as preparation for work. AFDC recipients who do not yet have a high school diploma should be

allowed to obtain their diploma or General Equivalency Degree as part of their job training, and to complete this secondary-level schooling before being required to participate in a work program or get a job. AFDC recipients who are enrolled in education and training programs should be considered to be fulfilling their work requirements.

Job training programs, to provide the most economic opportunity, should include training in nontraditional occupations for women. Job training programs should be expected to prepare program participants for actual and specific jobs in their communities and jobs that pay a living wage—an income that includes the costs of housing, child care, food, transportation, health care, and work-related expenses. Education, training, and work programs should all include adequate support services—from counseling and mentoring to transportation—to help welfare recipients weather the transition to the work force. But the most critical support services are child care and health insurance. AAUW urges Congress and the states to provide child care for any training or work program. Continuing child care and medical benefits should be provided for the new worker for a transition period after leaving AFDC.

AAUW also supports a guarantee of child care for women who participate in education, training, or work programs. AAUW opposes the child exclusion provisions and urges that the current child support enforcement system be strengthened to further help women meet their responsibilities to their children. Finally, education and job training programs must be held to some standards of accountability. Accountability should be measured by such factors as the number of program participants who get and keep jobs and the wages they earn in those jobs.

AAUW RECOMMENDATIONS

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION:

- Retain designated funds targeting women and girls.
- Retain competitive grant process in distributing funds for sex equity, single-parent, and displaced homemaker programs.
- Require accountability.
- Collect participation and outcome data by sex, race, and socioeconomic status.
- Demonstrate that targeted populations are served.

WELFARE REFORM:

- Allow education, including postsecondary education, and training to fulfill the work requirement.
- Provide child care for education, training, and work programs.
- Build in accountability measures.
- Provide support services for clients during training and the transition to work.
- Provide nontraditional career training.
- Strengthen child support enforcement.
- Permit no child exclusion provisions.

CONCLUSION

If we are to achieve the goal of welfare reform—breaking the cycle of poverty and welfare dependency—we must resist the temptation to indulge in quick-fix job training that prepares women for nothing but more poverty. Instead, we must acknowledge that education is the key. The best solution to the welfare problem is a strong system of public education that promotes equity and diversity, and provides high-quality career preparation for all students in academic and vocational courses. When the education system fails to provide such career preparation for all students, adult education and training programs must fill the gap by providing program participants with the widest possible range of educational opportunities, adequate support services, and basic skills to take advantage of those opportunities. Education is the surest path from welfare to work.

FOOTNOTES

1. U.S. General Accounting Office, *Multiple Employment Training Programs: Major Overhaul Is Needed* (Washington, DC: March 1994), 2, 24.

2. U.S. General Accounting Office, *Welfare to Work: Current AFDC Program Is Not Sufficiently Focused on Employment* (Washington, DC: December 1994), 34.

3. U.S. Department of Education, *Digest of Education Statistics* (Washington, DC: 1994), 399.

4. Ibid.

5. Donna Milgram and Kristin Watkins, *Ensuring Quality School-to-Work Opportunities for Young Women* (Washington, DC: Wider Opportunities for Women in cooperation with American Youth Policy Forum, March 1994), 1-2.

6. U.S. Bureau of the Census, unpublished 1995 data.

7. "Empowering America's Families: Documenting the Success of Vocational Equity Programs for Women and Girls" (Washington, DC: National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education, forthcoming).

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Research and Improvement, *National Assessment of Vocational Education: Volume II, Participation in and Quality of Vocational Education* (Washington, DC: 1994), Table A-2.2, p. A-16, and Table 1.7, p. 22.

11. U.S. Congress, House Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education, *Hearings on H.R. 7, A Bill to Extend the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act*, "Testimony of the National Coalition for Women and Girls in Education," Report prepared by Jill Miller (Washington, DC: March 7, 9, 16, and 21, 1989), 10.

12. Meg Sommerfield, "Lawmakers See Need to Untangle Voc-Ed Web," *Education Week* (January 18, 1995): 15, 18.

13. June O'Neill, "Can Work and Training Programs Reform Welfare?" *Journal of Labor Research* 14 (Summer 1993): 274-5.

14. Mark Greenberg, *Welfare Reform on a Budget: What's Happening in JOBS* (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, June 1992): i.

15. *Welfare to Work*, 19.

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AAUW promotes equity for women, education and self-development over the lifespan, and positive societal change.

The AAUW Educational Foundation provides funds to advance education, research, and self-development for women and to foster equity and positive societal change.

The AAUW Legal Advocacy Fund provides funding and a support system for women seeking judicial redress for sex discrimination.

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